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Introduction: Irish sports history

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Sports history as a discipline in Irish academia has had a long gestation. Perhaps this was inevitable, considering that a substantial move away from the study of traditional political history and towards social history only really began in Ireland in the early 1980s. For much of the twentieth century, the historiography of Irish sport, such as it was, was monopolized by studies of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA): the largest sports organization on the island. The GAA's importance as a pillar of the Irish cultural revival movement of the 1890s and its connection with radical Irish nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century meant that histories of the Association were invariably dominated by the perceived role of the organization and its members during the Irish revolutionary period.

While there was no denying the nationalist credentials of the GAA, and therefore no impediment to writing its story in the decades after the formation of the new Irish state, the situation was far more complicated for advocates of soccer, rugby and other imported sports. The perceived link between 'British' sports and unionist sentiment in Ireland, along with the political partition of the island, made it difficult for those wishing to investigate soccer, rugby or cricket's development there. For much of the past 100 years, a lack of success in such sports, at least at the international level, further stifled interest in documenting their impact on Irish life.

The 1990s finally saw the emergence of a generation of cultural and sports historians in Ireland who, influenced by what had been developing in British and American academia, sought to place the history of Irish sport in the wider international context of the Victorian Sports Revolution. Works by Mike Cronin, Paul Rouse and others further sought to move the historiography of Irish sport away from politics and place it within the broader context of Irish social, economic and cultural history (Rouse 1990; Cronin 1999). Their pioneering research laid the groundwork for an explosion of interest in Irish sports history since the turn of the current century. Crucial studies produced in the past decade, such as those by Neal Garnham, Tom Hunt, Rouse, Cronin and Mark Duncan, Liam O'Callaghan and James Kelly, give categorical proof to the strength and virility of the discipline in modern Irish academia (Garnham 2004; Hunt 2007; Cronin, Duncan, and Rouse 2009; O'Callaghan 2011; Kelly 2014). There are now more students than ever before researching the history of Irish sport and its role in Irish society at undergraduate, post-graduate and post-doctoral level. Moreover, 2015 will see the publication of several more important works on Irish sport including four books by contributors to this collection; Conor Curran's study of the development of sport in Donegal, Tom Hunt's official history of the Irish Olympic Council, Cormac Moore's investigation of the administrative split in Irish soccer in 1921 and David Toms' social history of soccer in Munster.

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Much of the credit for the increasing visibility of sport in Irish historiography must go to the foresight of Dr Paul Rouse and Dr William Murphy for organizing the inaugural Sports History Ireland Conference at University College Dublin on 18–19 February 2005. Shortly afterwards, the Sports History Ireland society was officially formed and it has since grown and thrived. The society's annual conference continues to attract large numbers of high quality papers and has become the main platform for Irish sports historians to present their research to an enthusiastic national and international audience. On 20 September 2014, Sports History Ireland hosted its 10th anniversary conference in Dublin: its largest and most successful event to date. The impetus for this special collection was both to recognize the work the society has done in promoting the discipline in Ireland over the past 10 years and a desire to present to an international audience a sample of the latest research being conducted within Irish sports history. The contributors to this volume are all veterans of past Sports History Ireland conferences and all the papers included were presented at either the 2013 or 2014 events.

In conclusion, we wish to thank all those who have attended and contributed to the Sport History Ireland conferences over the past 10 years. We also extend our deep thanks to the contributors of this volume for all their hard work. Finally, we thank Routledge for their generous support of the Sport History Ireland conference in the past and for the publication of this assembly of papers. It is hoped that this collection will offer an important and stimulating addition to the ever-growing volume of work on Irish sport history as well as a fitting testimony to the continuing role of the Sport History Ireland society in promoting such research.

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